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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of educational programs is often inconsistent with the need for imaginative innovations for educational improvement. Premature evaluation, preoccupation with "hard data" developed by the mass use of standardized tests, concern only for final results, lack of imagination, requirements that all projects in a program make provisions for evaluation, and a tendency to construe tentative findings as proof add to the failure of many educational evaluations. The need for sensible programs concerning evaluations is one of the major issues in American education. (Author/SE)

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EVALUATION OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

A Special Report

National Advisory Council on
Education Professions Development

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NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON EDUCATION PROFESSIONS DEVELOPMENT

Evaluation of Educational Programs

Evaluation of the wrong kind, at the wrong time, and for the wrong reasons has characterized too much of the current effort to appraise educational reforms. Meaningless evaluation is ruining the cutting edge of educational innovation.

Fundamental and lasting improvements in education are most likely to develop if schools, colleges, and other educational settings are provided the stimulus and the resources to explore new ways, to experiment with new ideas, to attack educational problems with imagination and daring. Such an approach offers the greatest prospect for wide-spread and penetrating innovation.

It is becoming increasingly clear that a number of policies and practices related to evaluation are not consistent with this approach, and are having an adverse effect on efforts to provide genuine innovation and improvement. Among such practices and policies, we cite for special note the following:

> . . . premature evaluation. Probably nothing violates common sense more than evaluation of an educational venture before it is operating on a basis where there is any reasonable possibility of tangible results. If anything is clear, it is that complex educational problems do not yield to even extraordinary effort in a short period of time. In such cases, a substantial period of planning is required. In addition, before the project can become operational, provisions must be made for the recruitment and training of new personnel and the retraining of existing personnel; the development of curriculum; the acquisition of equipment; the

development of new organizational arrangements; the involvement of parents and community; the working out of new relationships between the school and university. Finally, a project needs a period in which these new resources and arrangements can be brought together and worked out on a day-to-day basis. To conduct an evaluation before these conditions are met is to waste both time and money.

. . . almost total preoccupation with so-called "hard data" developed by mass use of standardized tests. Such test results are a legitimate and very useful type of evidence. But this is only one kind of evidence. To capture a full sense of what is being accomplished in a project, a variety of evaluation techniques should be employed. The case approach (applied either to a total project or to individuals affected by it), interviews, observation, even a sensitively written description of an activity will reveal kinds of information which are as essential as test scores in coming to a judgment about the progress or accomplishments of an endeavor. Each of these evaluation techniques can make a contribution in its own right. In addition, they can serve as correctives to the limitations of any one type of evaluation. Admittedly, the collection of objective data is convenient and economical. However, neither convenience nor economy should be the sole criterion of carrying out an evaluation.

. . . concern only for final results with little effort to determine why the objectives of a project were or were not achieved. In too many instances, evaluation represents something that is akin to a

a mania for data collection. Not enough attention is given to understanding factors that shape the outcome. Such insights are crucial. If a given project appears to have promise, those who would like to undertake a similar venture need to know not only that "it works"; they also need to know something of those factors which contributed to this positive outcome. Similarly, if a project does not appear to be realizing its objectives, its sponsors need to know what the difficulties are so that a judgment about modifications, or consideration of totally different alternatives, may be made on a rational basis. It is little wonder that so few evaluations are taken seriously; they are simply not informing.

. . . lack of imagination in selecting types of evaluation that are applicable to the special nature or purposes of an educational activity, or to its stage of development.

. . . requirements that all projects in a program make provisions for evaluation. Many -- perhaps most -- are granted barely enough funds for operating costs. Devoting scarce funds to a full-scale evaluation in such circumstances just does not make sense.

. . . a tendency to construe tentative findings as "proof." There appears to be a compulsion to label an educational endeavor as either a "dramatic success" or a "dismal failure." Neither our knowledge about education nor the state of the art in evaluation warrants such conclusions for many types of programs.

The cumulative effect of these ill-considered policies and practices is serious. Because of pressures to evaluate, the attention of those responsible for projects is diverted from the central task of achieving the objectives of the project. Superficial evaluation often result in contradictory evidence which confuses the public and undercuts support for educational programs. If evaluations are undertaken too early in the development of a project, project sponsors may become inclined to strike for "instant results" rather than attacking fundamental problems in order to produce lasting improvement.

In its second annual report, submitted earlier this year to the President and the Congress, this Council devoted a major section to research and evaluation. It has expanded on its statements in that report at this time because the need for sensible policies concerning evaluation of educational programs is rapidly emerging as one of the major issues in American education.